

## **PRIVATISING WAR**

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**For more than three weeks early 1999, a lone Mi-17 gunship - flown by a South African helicopter pilot Neill Ellis was all that stood between a depleted Nigerian ECOMOG force and the collapse of the Sierra Leone government. Anarchy was a whisker way. Alone at the controls for 12-hours a day without a break, except to refuel, he struck at rebel units in and around Freetown. During the course of it, Ellis took heavy retaliatory fire and, as he later told *Jane's Intelligence Review*<sup>1</sup>, 'while the rebels had a lot of RPGs and SAMs, I suppose I had my share of luck'.**

*Washington Post's* former West African correspondent James Rupert tells of an interesting insight to that period in a report from Freetown, Sierra Leone<sup>2</sup>. When Sierra Leone's lone Mi-24 combat helicopter blew an engine late last year, he wrote, it meant disaster for the government. The ageing Soviet-built gunship had been the government's most effective weapon against a rebel army that was marching on the capital.

Officials scrambled to repair the machine. But rather than rely on conventional arms dealers, they took bids from mining companies, gem brokers and mercenaries, most of whom held or wanted access to Sierra Leone's diamond fields. The government finally decided to buy \$3.8m worth of engine, parts and ammunition through a firm set up by Zeev Morgenstern, an executive with the Belgium-based Rex Diamond Mining Corp.

In the end, the parts proved unsuitable and the helicopter stayed on the ground. The rebels seized Freetown killing thousands of residents and maiming many more, he said. Since then the Freetown government hired a

bunch of Ethiopian technicians to work on the 'antiquated' Hind and these days it is all that Ellis flies.

This privatization of conflict has included the use of fuel-air bombs in an African war.

The Angolan Air Force dropped them on Unita positions around the strongholds of Bailundo and Andulo in the country's Central Highlands shortly before Savimbi was forced back into the bush, late 1999. Luanda's newly acquired Su-27s were unleashed in the attacks and the air bombs used were a legacy of an earlier period when mercenaries fought for the government.

Interestingly, fuel-air bombs deployed in an African insurgent or civil war is a concept that has been around a while. Referred to as 'the poor man's atom bomb' its use was first mooted when the South African Army was engaged in a succession of border wars in the early Eighties. Swapo's elaborate tunnel and trenchline systems in south Angola – a legacy of Vietcong involvement with the Marxist Luanda government - had become a feature of insurgent countermeasures, if only to avoid taking casualties from South African aircraft. These bombs were considered a means of driving the guerrillas into the open. Executive Outcomes first used fuel-air bombs in Angola in 1994 against Unita infantry and mechanized concentrations north of Luanda.

That option was again explored after Executive Outcomes went into Sierra Leone. This writer was present when plans to bomb Foday Sankoh's RUF rebel headquarters near the Liberian border using fuel air bombs were discussed. By then a lot of research had gone into the issue, including the fact that it would have been an ideal weapon to use in the close hillside confines where the rebels had bolstered their defenses. EO pulled out of Freetown before it could be implemented.

Judging from the extent of the destruction of some areas around Savimbi's HQ near Bailundu, last September, reports indicate that fuel-air bombs might again have been used in Angola's war. Civilian eyewitness accounts detailed the size and shapes of canisters dropped, as well as the behavior of the explosives. Some of them said that from a distance it resembled napalm, something that they had seen often enough in the past.

Fuel air bombs, while not illegal under the Geneva Convention, is regarded by international bodies as a transgression of human rights. A former EO source told the Johannesburg *Mail & Guardian* that a cache of South

African-made fuel-air bombs had been left behind in Angola in 1994 after Savimbi signed the Lusaka peace accord.

It's a gradual process, but a consequence of the spate of brush-fire conflicts throughout much of the Third world, is that war is being privatized. There is good reason: Western governments are reluctant to put their boys at risk for obscure causes that might be otherwise be difficult to explain to their electorates.

Two important events underscore this development. The first, early November 1999, was a repeat of the original Executive Outcomes operation. MPRI, a large private American military planning group with close ties to the Clinton administration was dispatched to Angola to train the Angolan Army of President Eduardo dos Santos. According to the *Mail & Guardian*, Military Professional Resources Inc (MPRI) reached an accord with Luanda to take the Angolan Army (FAA) in hand, very much as EO had done in the past. Whether MPRI instructors will see action is another matter.

Concurrently, a private South African force has become part of the UN contingent sent to Dili. Consisting mainly of people of mixed blood (Coloured, in South African parlance) it is intended that the force blend in with the East Timor locals. The force was assembled and trained by two Durban-based security companies (Empower Loss Control Services and KZN Security). Their job – under the aegis of the UN - is to work in an undercover capacity in the territory.

Jose 'Xanana' Gusmao, leader of the National Council of the East Timorese Resistance told South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki that he did not trust bodyguards that the Indonesians might provide.

With Executive Outcomes having subdued several rebel uprisings in Angola and Sierra Leone in the mid-nineties, African states have been the first to observe a proliferation of private armies. So, too in South America – and certain parts of Asia. South African helicopter gunship pilots flew as mercenaries for a while in Sri Lanka, not long before a 'force-for-hire' employed by the British company Sandline International was to have been deployed in Papua New Guinea. Australian regional politics (and PNG handouts) got in the way of that little exercise.

The track record, meanwhile, is interesting. The first time a South African mercenary force went into Sierra Leone in 1996, it took them less than three weeks to 'sanitize' a region around the capital half the size of Connecticut. A week later, a small, mainly black force comprising 85 men -

led by two surplus Russian-built BMP-2 IFVs and a couple of Mi-17s for topcover - drove Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels out of the Kono diamond fields, 180 kms into the interior. That operation took three days and crippled the rebels: diamonds were to have funded their revolt. At no stage did the South Africans ever have more than 350 men in Sierra Leone, supplied twice monthly from Johannesburg by Executive Outcomes own Boeing 727.

In the nineties, there has been mercenary involvement in a spate of civil wars, revolts, coups and uprisings. Early 1999, news agencies reported former Soviet Union pilots in the pay of Savimbi. There are also Russian and Ukrainian pilots right now flying MiG fighters on both sides of the current phase (mid-May, 2000) of the Ethiopian-Eritrean war. *US News and World Report* carried a report of Colonel Vyacheslav Myzin emerging from the cockpit of one of Ethiopia's newly acquired Su-27s after a demonstration flight<sup>3</sup>. He was labeled one of Africa's 'new mercenaries'. Similarly, in the Congo – (both before and after Kabila ousted Mobutu) Serbs, South Africans, Croats, Zimbabweans, Germans, French and other nationalities were involved, both for and against the government.

Last year in Angola, former Executive Outcomes personnel - almost all of them Southern Africans – were involved on both sides of a civil war that has been going on intermittently since 1975 (not counting the 14-year anti-Colonial guerrilla war against the Portuguese, before that). Some of them are still there, mopping up.

Significantly, some of these soldiers trained and fought alongside Angolan government forces in the mid-1990s. With EO's demise on January 1, 1999, following South African government pressure to disband and an act of Parliament making any kind of mercenary activity illegal, a number of old hands have surreptitiously switched sides and are now directing Savimbi's efforts against the government. In the long term, Luanda's dominance in the air will prevail.

Other mercenaries (again, of African extraction) are said to have been seen in action with rebel contingents in Guine-Bissau. In Senegal's Cassamance Province, early reports speak of foreign veterans (possibly French) helping dissident rebels. So, too, in Namibia's Caprivi's *Zipvel* where a rebel force crossed the border from Angola last June and tried to drive government troops into the bush. The dissidents had been recruited and trained by mercenaries working for UNITA. Their objectives were clear: to weaken Namibian support for Angola and Kabila, both of whom oppose a Unita power base in Angola.

In the Sudan, while Iraqi pilots fly some of its planes, the Khartoum government has salted its own ground forces with Afghan *mujahadeen*, Yemenis and other foreign nationals against a Christian/animist uprising in the south<sup>4</sup>. With the start of the new millennium, this war enters its 44<sup>th</sup> sporadic year of fighting. Mercenaries have also been seen in uprisings in Burundi, Congo (Brazza), Rwanda, Uganda and in what was once termed the Northern Frontier District of Kenya where most of the insurgents are Somali, some backed by warlords, others acting on a freelance basis.

There have also been more reports of mercenary activity in the Comores Archipelago where French national Bob Denard overthrew an established a government of his own following a seaborne invasion in 1978. After arresting President Ali Soilih (he was later shot), Denard - backed by his mostly French and Belgian clique (but including some South Africans) - ruled the country as his private fief. He was ousted by a French naval task force, 11 years later<sup>5</sup>.

Elsewhere, there were Russian, French and other mercenaries active during the war in Kosovo (and earlier, in Georgia, Chechnia and, more recently, in Dagestan and Chechnia again at the end of the millennium). Hired fighters were also identified in conflicts in Afghanistan, Armenia, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan and elsewhere. Similarly, members of Columbia's drug cartels employed South African and British mercenaries for combat and training anti-government militias.

More recently, a Pakistani-trained mercenary force was accused of massacring 23 Kashmiri Pandits in India. A government spokesman said in New Delhi that this action – the third of its kind in 15 months – was a direct bid to topple locally-elected government officials. Since then, hostilities in Kashmir have escalated<sup>6</sup>. So, too in Sri Lanka, which has seen South African pilots at the controls of helicopter gunships used against the Tamil Tigers.

Before that, during the Lebanese civil war, mercenaries – allied to one cause or another - were used both for training and as combatants by a variety of the 100-plus factions involved in that country's 16-year debacle. Some, hired by the South Lebanese Army (SLA) commander, Major Sa'ad Haddad's were American and it mattered little that Jerusalem funded Haddad or that the SLA was the brainchild of an Israeli journalist and military reservist, Colonel Yoram Hamisrachi: their purpose, throughout, was to bolster numbers. Their pay was nominal, perhaps \$200 a month and conditions under which they lived, primitive.

Not long afterwards, the staunchly Christian Lebanese Force Command (LFC) started using US volunteers for tactical and sniper training

in and around Beirut. Some of these people were sent to Lebanon at the behest of Colonel Robert K. Brown, publisher of *Soldier of Fortune*.

Others, mainly French and German radicals, attached themselves to a variety of Muslim forces that opposed them. It was about then that the Falangists hired a former Rhodesian Air Force Canberra pilot<sup>7</sup>. He was paid \$10,000 a month but never flew a sortie, possibly just as well since the entire airspace north of Beirut was dominated by Syrian SAM batteries.

For all this, and perhaps justifiably, there is a powerful ground swell of opinion against using hired guns to fight wars and kill people. The abhorrence of employing freelancers to do military work is almost universal. Also, it goes against a fundamental ethos of traditional professional armies, which is why Australia reacted when Sandline accepted a contract to fight against Bougainville's revolutionaries.

As David Shearer says in an article published in *Foreign Affairs* (Fall edition, 1998), for three centuries the accepted international norm had been that only nation-states were permitted to fight wars. The rise of private companies entering the business as a legitimate, profit-orientated activity, he observes has provoked outrage and prompted calls for them to be outlawed. The popular press 'has used labels like "dogs of war" conjuring up images of freebooting and rampaging Rambos overthrowing weak – usually African – governments.'

Yet, in recent times, there has been a shift in the nature of war. Martin van Creveld, one of the preeminent war theoreticians of our time postulated as much in his book, *The Transformation of War*. He reckons that the sort of conventional wars waged by nation-states are fading from the map. In future, he suggests, 'war-making entities' are likely to resemble those of the premodern era. These might include smaller, regional conflicts in which one tribal element is pitted against another, religious associations, mercenaries and commercial entities like those that opened Europe's trading routes to the Far East. Both the Dutch and British East India companies had their own armies and all of them mercenaries.

Van Creveld had a vision of his own for the future: 'As used to be the case until at least 1648, military and economic functions will be reunited...much of the day-to-day burden of defending society against the threat of low-intensity conflict will be transferred to the booming security business...and, indeed, the time may come when the organizations which comprise that business, will, like the *condotierri* of old, take over the state.'

There is good reason why the developed world is reluctant to get involved in fierce, distant, often ethnic-related brush fire conflicts which, like those in Somalia, the Congo and Rwanda led nowhere. When the UN, under the auspices of *Operation Just Hope* went into Somalia in 1991, it was motivated first by the suffering of a million civilians who were starving and second, to try to stop the fighting. Well-intentioned, it was also hoped to bring a measure of order within a socio-military system gone berserk. But it didn't take long to discover that nobody had factored in the ability of a handful of bloody-minded Somali warlords to offer such stiff resistance.

An important consequence of that little debacle is that it will take another generation before the brutal TV images of bodies of US soldiers being dragged naked through Mogadishu streets are erased from the minds of the American public. Certainly, as Rwanda showed, it will be a while before American troops are again committed to some real or imagined African cause.

The end of the Cold War has also shifted priorities. Backing one tin-pot dictator against another is no longer an option. In any event, it doesn't make sense. Even more difficult is trying to rationalize their motives because avarice is usually at the root of it. There is also the reluctance in Western countries to intervene in other peoples' wars because nobody will take casualties without very good reason. This is one of the reasons why ground forces were never committed in Kosovo. Others call it the 'bodybag syndrome'.

It makes sense, therefore, to look to an alternative: and perhaps one of the reasons why the mercenary is making a comeback.

Sam Roggeveen, a lecturer in strategic studies at the School of Australian and International Studies argues in his thesis, "The Case for the Mercenary Army" that 'war today is less a matter of applying massive force across a wide front as it is of applying intelligent force at carefully selected points.'

Thus, he declares, all things being equal, an efficient, adequately equipped and well-motivated force should always achieve a good advantage in any Third World Struggle.

Even Somalia –weighted by its own set of imponderables –could have been averted. At the core of that debacle was a top-heavy, hideously bureaucratic UN where nobody had made any real attempt at leveling the playing fields by matching force with force as the intervention force has since done in East Timor. For one, the Australians never had to ask anybody whether they could fire back.

In Somalia, then, as in South Lebanon, even today, with UNIFIL, there are ridiculous prerequisites for taking any kind of military action. A mercenary force, in contrast, carries none of this baggage. At the same time, the alternative does present its own set of difficulties. Some of these are of perception; others are of recent history.

It is also true that the image of the contemporary mercenary, *per se*, is hardly flattering, due, in part, to endless stories of indiscriminate killings in which mercenaries in the Congo of the sixties were involved. These war dogs left a muddled trail of violence when they left.

The problem stemmed, in part, from the Irishman, 'Mad' Mike Hoare who raised a freelance commando to fight in Moise Tshombe's Katanga. Afterwards there were reports of killings on the part of some white mercenaries, reinforced every so often by gory photos of groups of smiling white troops holding the heads of black men aloft, like trophies, almost. That specific sequence appeared in many of the newsmagazines of the time.

There were also illegal American, Canadian and other 'volunteers' in Rhodesia's war, some of whom served later with South Africa's 44 Parachute Brigade in Angola. While military discipline in both countries was strict, the racial connotations of white men fighting blacks galled the liberal world. In the political climate of the day it hardly mattered that in both countries, the preponderance of forces fighting black insurgents was African. The list goes on and it includes those fighting for other causes in the Sudan.

The classic case against any future mercenary role is still the role of a notorious Cypriot mercenary colonel in Angola who called himself Callan. Hired by the CIA in a hopeless last-ditch stand by the CIA to stem the advance of a joint MPLA and Cuban offensive northwards out of Luanda<sup>8</sup> – Callan – more psychopath than soldier - led the pack in sheer brutality. His exploits (killing his own people as mindlessly as the enemy) are the standard set piece used by opponents of the concept of modern-day 'armies for hire'.

These objections are well founded. Many of these people were not only beyond the law, they often instituted their own brutal standards of jurisprudence on the very communities that they were supposed to be protecting. One bunch of thugs – as we have seen elsewhere in Africa - had replaced another

Since then, things have changed. It was notable that once Executive Outcomes controlled parts of Sierra Leone, one of the first steps taken by the EO regional commander Colonel Roelf van Heerden, was to approach local tribal elders in a bid to establish some sort of framework within which

order could be maintained. During the week that I spent at EO's regional eastern HQ – the building was on a hill overlooking Koidu - there was a constant flow of headmen and sub-chiefs in and out of the facility, attending meetings, asking advice or witnessing trials.

It was a lengthy process, but van Heerden, a quiet-spoken former South African army commander - who had set himself up as an ombudsman to protect the interests of local people from an often-drugged or ill disciplined Sierra Leone Army - would always find time to listen.

An American journalist, Elizabeth Rubin reported on EO activities in Sierra Leone in a lengthy article in the New York magazine *Harpers*. The South African mercenaries, she said, 'were unreservedly hailed by the chiefs, the businessmen and the street people as saviours<sup>9</sup>.' At one stage the entire town turned out in a prayer meeting 'to ask God to protect those who are protecting us.' Even the British High Commission in Freetown offered EO members hospitality on casual Friday night get-togethers.

During my own visit (which came about a month after EO officers had started dispensing their version of bush justice) several British-trained Sierra Leone officers told me that they had never seen discipline among their troops so good. Prior to that, several had been 'fragged' by their soldiers for trying to install order in the ranks.

Although the South African mercenaries had their own short-shrift way of dealing with lawlessness - usually a thrashing with *sjamboks*<sup>10</sup> - the entire legal process, from the initial hearing to conclusion took place in the presence of tribal chiefs, mostly elders. They were requested by van Heerden to either concur or reject his determinations, which they did, democratically, by a show of hands.

At the end of it, General Ian Douglas, a Canadian negotiator for the UN stated: 'EO gave us this stability<sup>11</sup>. In a perfect world, of course, we wouldn't need an organization like EO, but I'd be loath to say they have to go just because they are mercenaries.'

Eventually EO left Sierra Leone. The British organization Sandline International was suppose to take its place but this effort, sadly, became embroiled in the kind of dispute that only politicians can concoct. We all know what happened then: the latest tally, late 1999, is about 15,000 Sierra Leonian civilians murdered by the rebels and many more thousands, including children, maimed by the rebels.

The role of Executive Outcomes personnel in a succession of African forays has been regarded by some observers as remarkably successful, considering

that they were active for a comparatively short time. Even its critics much concede that. Operations eventually included air and ground forays into the Democratic Republic of the Congo (where EO troops prevented the rebels from overrunning the strategic Inga Dam, south-west of the capital) as well as in Kenya, Congo-Brazza, Uganda and elsewhere.

There were even negotiations to send a force into Mexico to quell the Chiapas uprisings in the south. US pressure quickly put a stop to that. There is no question that while the organization existed, it acquired a very distinct corporate character.

EO's first sortie into Angola in March, 1993, came after Eeben Barlow was hired to assemble a group of about 50 former South African special forces officers and men to lead an attack against a well-entrenched 500-strong Unita force holding the Soyo oil facility north of the capital. In a subsequent briefing, Colonel Hennie Blaauw disclosed that it was a close run thing. 'We pushed them out, took casualties but they kept coming back. Finally, we could do no more. Also, we were running out of ammunition. Then, suddenly they pulled right back and were gone. It could easily have gone the other way, he told me in a comprehensive briefing of the company's early days while I was at their main operational base Cabo Ledo.

Blaauw said that Soyo was the turning point for the force. There was much skepticism in Luanda when they first arrived. 'But once we had some of our people killed, they could see we were serious. We finally had their trust, but there were still some who doubted our motives. There were those who believed that we might be working for somebody else, the Americans, perhaps,' he added.

Former EO executives – then and now - have aggressively defended their role in stemming violence. They are unequivocal about their professionalism in doing so. Nor have they denied using internationally accepted legal and financial instruments to secure (and maintain) their deals. In order to achieve military objectives, they always opted for quick, sharp solutions.

Sometimes this meant (as in the grab for the Kono diamond fields) combined ground/air surgical strikes in which objectives were seized and few prisoners taken. There was certainly no ambiguity about the message they imparted. While EO remained in place, RUF rebels all but suspended their operations in a greater part of the country. It is indicated that the moment their contract was abrogated, Sankoh's rebels were again mobilized.

More salient, perhaps is the fact that EO consistently supported only recognized governments, though they had a lot of opportunity to do

otherwise. The company tended to avoid regimes unpalatable to the international community. While traveling across Africa with Lafras Luitigh, EO's former operations manager, he told me of a \$100 million offer made by Nigerian dissidents to 'train a revolutionary army to overthrow the Abuja government.' Nigeria, then, was ruled by the tyrant Sani Abacha and just about everybody in the country would have liked to see him go. The plotters intended bringing Nigeria back into the democratic fold, but EO was not to be the instrument, Luitigh stressed.

We couldn't do it, he said 'Nor would we ever support a revolt against the established order,' Luitigh told me on the flight between Luanda and Freetown. 'Once you start fiddling in the internal affairs of countries, you can no longer justify your motive of fair play,' he said. 'Anything else and we would be in the pay of the highest bidder,' he told Jane's *International Defense Review*. In any event, he said, that kind of role would have undermined the confidence and trust that EO had worked very hard to engender among its clients, a fundamental *raison d'être* for its existence. He reckoned.

Considering that Executive Outcomes remained a major player in the business of irregular warfare for less than a decade, an astonishing amount has been written about the organization. At the same time EO has challenged just about anybody who suggested that the people that it employed were mercenaries: in this regard it has proved remarkably litigious.

Throughout, the company has claimed to be nothing more than a military training group, which as events proved, is nonsense. Even to the most sanguine observer it was obvious that force was used to achieve most of objectives. Its pilots flew helicopter gunships, MiG-23s or PC-7s fitted with underwing rocket pods.

Much of the controversy involving EO has also centered on the way in which the company was paid for its services. Sometimes it took cash, but that was exceptional. Other times it was a share of resources: diamond or gold mines.

Economic involvement in the affairs of client states – particularly in impoverished Africa - remains a sensitive issue. This is especially so among those firms who had a stake in the original EO and who still work in Africa: Branch Energy, Heritage Gas and Oil or the Strategic Resources Group, a British company registered in the Bahamas, included. It is of note that the last commander of EO in Freetown, Brigadier Bert Sachse, is still there. Rupert reported in his article that Lifeguard, which has indeterminate links with some

of these firms, now employs Sachse (and some of the old faces involved with EO).

Perhaps because of a traditional official South African revulsion for the press - which rarely allowed the media within an arms length - much of what has been written about EO until now has been based on hearsay. Only a handful of correspondents were allowed to observe EO operations from up close. Among them, there was perhaps one other with a military background.

Consequently articles like 'The New Mercenaries and the Privatization of Conflict' by Lt Col Thomas Adams, US Army (Rtd) is really little more of a re-hash of what appeared before<sup>12</sup>. Truth is, almost nobody has seriously analyzed the factors that contributed to EO's success.

Money is certainly at the root of it. Interestingly, all EO's directors made a lot of it in a comparatively short time. Luitigh, for instance, before he joined EO, was a regular in the SA Army with South Africa's Reconnaissance Commandos). Today he is a dollar millionaire. This is not surprising for an organization that was grossing between \$25 million and \$40 million a year, though London's *Daily Telegraph* puts it at double that.

The South African economy played a significant role. Once President Mandela took over and empowered those who were formerly disenfranchised, things changed dramatically. Suddenly, a lot of South Africans found themselves out of work. The majority were competent, experienced fighting men with years of experience on the border. Now they were destitute. The fact that the South African currency moved sharply lower didn't help either. Consequently, by the time that EO came along, the prospect for working tax-free (and for US dollars) appealed to many military old timers.

By international standards, most South African operators - black and white - were paid a fraction of what the average European mercenary would regard as bottom line. Still, black or white, there was never any shortage of applicants at EO's Pretoria headquarters, one of the executives told me.

EO's success in the field in remote, hostile, often-unfriendly Third World regions was due largely to three basic interlocking disciplines and these were all but sacrosanct.

The first was that no ground operation was contemplated without adequate top cover. For this purpose EO acquired several Mi-17 gunships of its own. The second centered on good, practical military experience. EO's

command encouraged resolute, often independent tactics to achieve an objective and most times that didn't come out of books.

Last came discipline and it was strictly enforced. At EO's Cabo Ledo base on the coast south of Luanda in Angola, the T-shirts worn by some of the men had a motto emblazoned on the back: 'Fit in or F\*\*\* off'. Anyone who stepped out of line was put on the first plane home. Obviously there was a lot these mercenaries had in common, including a shared and empathetic military background with years in the field together. Another important factor was a common language: Afrikaans which allowed an additional measure of security in radio comms.

One of the first comments made by an EO escort officer was that the company liked to nurture a clear and cohesive identity. Language and the Southern African connection forged it, he said. It mattered little that some of the black troops were from Namibia: they had fought alongside their South Africans colleagues for most of their adult lives and regarded themselves as part of a system that had evolved with 20 years of war against hostile neighbors. Also, while the very occasional European (though never an American) would make it into EO's ranks, you needed to be able to speak – or at very least, understand the language - to be accepted within the ranks.

Consequently just about all operational radio comms were in Afrikaans which helped maintain a high level of security. Thus, in Sierra Leone (during the first phase of EO operations) though Foday Sankoh's rebels were often better equipped than government forces and were able to intercept EO radio traffic almost at will, they understood little of it. This was especially valuable during intense ground and air contacts in the Battle of Freetown when communications lines were open.

Where EO did come short during their Angolan operations, was in internal security. At least on one occasion that this writer knows of, Savimbi managed to infiltrate a man into EO ranks. This man, a radio operator, worked out of EO's Saurimo regional HQ in the north-east of the country and he compromised at least two clandestine helicopter drops. That effort, I was told, resulted in the deaths of all concerned; about eight men in all.

Because Unita troops were in the vicinity of both drops, the local EO commander set a trap and it worked, though he was evasive about detail. The radio operator disappeared without trace shortly afterwards. The man's family was told that he had been killed in a skirmish with the enemy and his insurance was paid without argument<sup>13</sup>.

Once EO had been disbanded and there was more trouble in some of the countries in which it had formerly been active – Angola, specifically –

both Luanda and the rebel leader Savimbi started recruiting former EO veterans. An immediate and almost intractable problem was that the easy camaraderie of the past gave way to a lot of tension and distrust. Nobody was quite certain exactly whom his buddies might be working for.

On the more positive side, an EO's strength was that it had intimate knowledge and understanding of the continent. Almost everybody involved had grown up there. None of the men who went into Angola or Sierra Leone were under any of the sort of misconceptions that bug European or American combatants who suddenly find themselves among the disadvantaged, Somalia being the classic example

The people around Freetown, for example, are indigent. The majority had been oppressed by a string of dictators since independence from Britain in 1960. These were people who were not all that dissimilar from the throngs of Angolans or ethnic Namibians with whom they had been associated in the past. EO personnel didn't have to be told what the region in which they were active could – *and could not* – provide. Africa, as always, remains the ultimate leveler.

It hardly needed to be stressed among EO recruits that the conditions that they faced were tough, demanding and uncompromising. Or that most regions were among the most primitive anywhere. Militarily, this was an environment in which many of them had been weaned.

Also, their relations with the people - from the President down - needed to be exemplary. If a man could not relate equitably with black folk, he had no place in the organization. There were (and are still) many examples of interracial strife elsewhere on the continent and while the South Africans haven't exactly been paragons of racial equality in the past, they understood and could empathise with the people with whom they worked. Not so some Europeans who are recruited on mercenary contracts.

One example: Mobutu engaged a number of Balkan mercenaries – Bosnians and Croats - during the final stages of Kabila's campaign. Throughout their period of service, they were surly and often unconscionably arrogant and uncommunicative towards those with whom they were associated. Consequently, they achieved very little. This mindset would never engender trust, that one quality essential for success in any Third World country. At the same time, while EO executives would quickly ingratiate themselves with the military leadership, there was very little socializing between EO officers and top brass wherever they operated. Further down the ranks, there was none at all.

Prior to going into a country, while still negotiating a contract, EO functionaries would state very clearly and in writing what they were able to offer and exactly what it was that they intended to achieve. Having agreed on the basics (and with a contract price on the table) other parameters would be tackled. This would include issues such as objectives, who would fund what and cost, equipment and weapons systems, support aircraft and exactly what EO would bring to the party. Other aspects detailed security, internal movement, bases and airports to which the mercenary unit would have access.

Further discussions would detail accommodation (usually serviced apartments in the capital, with attendant staff), liaison with and possibly training of local forces, lines of command, supplies, rations, the evacuation of casualties, discipline and the all-important demarcation of responsibility. All of the headings all be tabulated, recorded and related documents signed by both parties.

It didn't always work that way. In Angola, early on, while EO did have a contract, some issues related to security were fudged, mainly because it took a while for the Angolans to accept these maverick South Africans as allies. Consequently there were confrontations between EO officers and members of a notorious black-uniformed special police unit colloquially known as 'Ninjas'. Tough, evil-minded and well-trained, their officers regarded the white Africans with manifest distrust. At one stage they hampered movement until there was a shoot-out at the Saurimo air base. None of EO's men were killed, though some were wounded.

By the time I stepped off EO's Boeing 727 at Saurimo, most of these issues had been resolved, but I could sense that there was little love lost between the two. That became clear after I had taken a picture of a derelict MiG-23 parked on the runway. There was nothing 'secret' about it: it had been photographed by just about everyone in the unit. Nevertheless, a Ninja commissar arrested me and my camera was confiscated. Since it was a matter of precedent and the process could be repeated, it took Blaauw and another EO director hours to settle the matter.

As one of them said afterwards, 'you never know how these people react. You need to be cautious *and civil* at all times.'

Having had its share of experiences with dysfunctional Angolans, EO was determined that it shouldn't happen in Sierra Leone. They insisted from the start that they should have access to the president at all times, immediate and unrestricted, which they got. On of our first day in Freetown, I accompanied Luitigh on a social call to State House. It came after a phone

call to his office and was a one-on-one between the two men during which time they discussed diamond concessions.

Communications and logistics were two other priorities. At EO headquarters on a large peri-urban estate on the outskirts of Pretoria, the company maintained a 24-hour radio watch. It had staff in constant touch with all its interests and units in Africa. Signals, routine checks, domestic messages and need lists would constantly be patched through, sometimes, in Sierra Leone's case, using an Angolan station as a booster.

Transport remained EO's strongest card, especially in Africa. The company acquired two Boeing 727s from American Airlines for \$500,000 each, both planes being unsuitable for the US because of excessive noise levels. Other aircraft that it brought in included King Airs and two former RAF transport aircraft for medivac purposes, which ended up ferrying more critical malaria cases to overseas hospitals than wounded personnel.

Without its own aircraft, EO would never have been able to operate the way it did. With the exception of Southern Africa, movement around the rest of sub-Saharan Africa is often uncertain and it is getting worse. With daily demands being made on an organization with such vast and diverse interests, it would have been impossible for them to work the way they did without their own transport.

Through another British subsidiary company, the Luanda-registered Ibis Air, EO operated on average, two flights a week (initially from Lanseria, and later, from Johannesburg International) to Angola, calling first at Cabo Ledo and then Saurimo and, if circumstances warranted it, the capital. Flights to Freetown's Lungi Airport were every 14 days, with a refueling stop at Luanda in both directions.

While some of the heavier equipment, such as vehicles, ammunition (where applicable) and other supplies went by sea, everything that a force in the field needed to wage war was ferried in by plane. This included the company's perishable food supplies, spares, medical equipment, radios and the rest. It took about six hours to load the plane and apart from what was in the hold, the stuff would be piled up in every available space in the passenger section. Towards the end, EO added a maritime unit which worked off the Sierra Leone coast.

Whoever was responsible for EO's logistics, knew his business. I was kitted out for a bush foray at the company's main depot, a large storehouse at the Aberdeen military base on the outskirts of Freetown. Much of the

equipment was the same that the South African Army had used in Angola: with that war over, it had been sold as surplus.

There has been criticism about the company's efficacy as a fighting force which is unwarranted. Significantly, EO achieved most of the objectives for which it was tasked.

Anybody who had anything to do with Executive Outcomes found that in all departments, it was a highly professional military body. It would not have lasted a year in the tough, combative Angolan environment had it not been so. Planning and pre-battle liaison throughout for ground and air support elements, was meticulous and always involved the participation of unit commanders<sup>14</sup>.

What remained a fairly consistent problem in both Angola and the Congo was language, particularly among those flying support roles flying gunships and support jets. Military ATC communications with military air bases was mostly in Portuguese, or, as was the case in the Congo, French.

It was different on the ground: while few of the officers could speak either, many of their black troops could.

- 1 Personal telephone interview with the writer, December, 1998
- 2 James Rupert, Washington Post Foreign Service: 'Diamond Hunters Fuel Africa's Brutal Wars': October 16, 1999
- 1 'The Russians are Coming' *US News and World Report*; 15 March, 1999.
- 4 *Jane's Intelligence Review*, London, November, 1999
- 2 Personal interview with Denard, Rivonia, Johannesburg, March, 1992
- 6 *The Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, January 27, 1998
- 7 The writer used his own ties with the LFC to facilitate this development.
- 8 The mercenary Callan and several of his group (including several Americans) was captured by government forces, tried by a military tribunal in Luanda and executed by firing squad.
- 9 'An Army of One's Own'; *Harpers* New York, pp 44-55, Elizabeth Rubin, February, 1997
- 10 Heavy-duty leather strips usually of hippo hide and often associated with brutal Boer justice in South Africa during the Apartheid era.
- 11 Rubin *Ibid*
- 12 *Parameters*: US Army War College Quarterly, Summer, 1999
- 13 Interview with Colonel Hennie Blaauw, EO base commander at Saurimo, NE Angola
- 14 Personal interviews with Arthur Walker, Karl Alberts, Neill Ellis and 'Juba' Joubert in Pretoria, Luanda and Freetown.